

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This is a monograph on a particular approach to learning in professional education at the college level. We call this approach *learning-in-community*. To describe its most basic assumption in the simplest of terms, we believe that learners learn best when they take classroom learning out into the local community and apply it to real problems faced by real (organizational) clients; we term this active learning. Learners learn in many ways when they engage in such an experience. They learn by subjecting theories and principles to the real world. They learn through interaction with other learners like themselves who are engaged in the experience with them. They learn about the community they live in by working on its problems. *Learning-in-community* is not a new method, nor is it unique. However, looking back over the more than ten years that we have used it in our teaching, we can say that it changes both *what* is learned and *how* it is learned. It fundamentally changes the instructor's role. In this sense, it can be revolutionary in professional education.

In our instructional practice, we restrict the pool of clients to non-profit organizations. A small number of clients have been public institutions – government agencies, public schools, and public libraries. The rest have been community-based organizations – considerably smaller non-profits. Additionally, we restrict our focus to information and communication technologies (ICTs). Non-profits struggle daily with a host of challenges, and ICTs certainly are one of them. Most lack access to technical expertise and ICT resources, and CBOs tend to particularly poorly equipped in this regard. Our choice of client pool and problem domain was thus simple: we felt that we could help fill the knowledge gap to a certain extent through our classes, while simultaneously providing our students with active learning opportunities in the community.

As a method, learning-in-community involves small student teams, in the role of consultants, working closely with a non-profit client on their ICT problems. The first author began using the method in one of his upper level classes in 1991 at the School of Information Studies, Syracuse University. The decision to try the method was prompted by students. In their course evaluations from previous semesters, students had emphasized the value that “hands-on” learning might add to the course content, which was focused on telecommunications and computer networking. Subsequently, a faculty colleague helped identify a client site (a public high school). The first author developed a consulting exercise for use with the networking class in the 1991 Fall semester. The semester-long consulting experience offered through

regularly scheduled, for-credit graduate and undergraduate-level classes today constitutes the core of our active learning model and has been used continuously by the first author since 1991. Our active learning model, presented in the following chapter, is an operational level description of the learning-in-community approach.

The first author established the Center for Active Learning in 1997 at the School to expand the range of technical services that could be offered to non-profit clients through the School's classes. Client evaluations suggested that while they found the consulting intervention useful, their needs often exceeded telecommunications and networking and included other areas – such as database and systems analysis, and user training. The Center was established to serve as a clearinghouse to meet these needs by matching them up with courses at the School. Relevant faculty were recruited to use their classes to address specialized needs of clients. However, with the growing indispensability of the Internet to non-profits, ICT networking has remained a staple client need throughout. Training the user on appropriate use of ICTs emerged as a vital new area under the second author's leadership. Again, the growth of the Internet and the increasingly important role that ICTs in general play in the life of non-profits has been a major impetus.

In 1998, a year after its establishment, the Center became part of a larger entity at the School – the Community & Information Technology Institute (CITI). CITI's objectives are broader than learning-in-community interventions and include prototype development and testing, and a research and development focus on the planning, design and implementation of advanced ICT solutions such as broadband. CAL continues as the main learning-in-community vehicle under CITI. CITI's service focus continues to be the non-profit sector in the local community. CITI's prototyping projects offer students additional opportunities for learning-in-community involving non-profit clients. Unlike with CAL projects, however, such opportunities are made available to students outside regular classes on account of the longer-than-a-semester duration of the average application prototyping cycle. Students interested in CITI projects undertake them as part of an independent study arrangement for credit.

Learning-in-community engages the learner actively in the content of learning¹. The learner as *apprentice* must apply principles in practice, test their validity in that particular situation and modify as necessary, and demonstrate the suitability of the proposed solution to co-learners on the team, the instructor, and the client. The context could be simulated, as when the learner is placed in an artificial environment and asked to respond to stimuli there. Simulated contexts can be valuable tools for learning. A consulting case study, for example, may be designed to present a range of technical and social issues in a simulated organizational setting. However, actual work settings are usually richer and present the learner with a broader range of stimuli than would be possible with a case study. Importantly, the stimuli are "raw" in that the learner must process them. The learner must decide what the problem is before attempting to deal with it. Problem formulation, in other words, is a challenge

¹ Active learning has much in common with *experiential learning* – which is learning from direct experience and reflection. *Learning by doing* is another closely related approach.

that confronts the learner in actual work settings in a way that it cannot in a case study, however rich and ambiguous it is by design. Natural settings also allow client-centered effort, an important feature of learning in the professions. We believe that learning occurs in and through particular social configurations when learners work with other learners and relevant other actors in natural environments. Learning is thus *situated* in a multiple sense, with the consulting team's configuration (size, available skills, internal social climate) and its relations with the work setting contributing as much to learning as book principles. Learning arises as much from the learner's social participation in the experience as from technical skills mastery and cognitive operations. The content of learning – *what* is learned – and the social contexts in which learning occurs are intimately related.

2. LEARNING-IN-COMMUNITY: FOUR ELEMENTS

Learning for practice is an appropriate emphasis in professional education. Our program is founded on four elements: client-centered work in organizational work settings, apprenticeship, the social dimension of professional action, and project task design. The first three are enablers of learning and socialization in professional practice and may be influenced through the last. The instructor can design the learning stimulus – the project task – so as to influence the process and outcomes of learning for practice

2.1. *Client-centered Work in Natural Settings*

Providing a product or service to a client or clients is a hallmark of professional work (Schein & Kommers, 1972). The first challenge the professional often faces is locating the client. Who is the organizational sponsor and appropriate target of her effort and the recipient of its outputs? There is usually a related question that needs definition as well: Are there other, secondary clients? In our experience, learners tend to view the representative who functions as the liaison between the consulting team and the client as their client, at least initially. This person may well be a sponsor of the effort, but the person who decides whether or not to implement the team's recommendation may be someone else in the organization. In such cases, the primary client (i.e. the decision-maker) and the project liaison (who may be a secondary client) may have divergent views on the project's objectives. Should these differences be resolved and if, so, how should the project team resolve them? The project team must learn how to manage client expectations and client relations over the course of the project. Such functions form part of social maintenance functions (versus project task functions) (Hackman & Oldham, 1982) that an effective consultant learns never to discount. Project success depends on how well she manages task and maintenance demands.

Learners working collaboratively in teams also have *internal* clients. A team member is a client for a fellow member's outputs. The learner must manage task and social maintenance functions within the team, not just with the client(s) outside. Effective collaborative work depends on her ability to manage interdependence. An important aspect of this is her ability to learn from other members who may have



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